

**Ninth Sunday After Pentecost
August 10, 2003
Psalm 23**

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Theme: **My Shepherd Will Supply My Needs**

1. My Shepherd is Jesus
2. My needs are many
3. His supply is unfailing

KJV Psalm 23:1 {A Psalm of David.} The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. 2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. 3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. 5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I have to tell you that as a preacher confronted with the task of preparing a sermon on so beautiful a section of Scripture as this, you begin to think, *Maybe the best thing I could do would be to read the text and sit back down.* You become concerned that your attempts at dissecting such a beautiful and comforting portion of Scripture will only end up cluttering or contaminating a poem that comes from the mind of God through the pen of King David. You wonder, *What could I possibly say that would improve on this text?* But, of course, preaching on any text in the Bible is not an attempt to improve on what God has said. It is rather an attempt to expound it, to explain it, and to apply it to hearts of those who hear it. So, for a few minutes this morning, let's take this jewel of God's Word into our hands and examine several of its facets.

1. My Shepherd Is Jesus

"The LORD is my shepherd." For something like 3000 years, this confession has been spoken by people lying at death's door, by soldiers headed into battle, and simply by believers rehearsing the basics of their trust in God. It's a comforting confession of faith. Martin Luther said, *"In this single little word "shepherd" there are gathered together in one almost all the good and comforting things that we praise in God."* (Vol. 12, p. 152)

David says, "The LORD is my shepherd." Spelled as it is with all capital letters, the name LORD is God's covenant name, Jehovah. This name identifies him as the God of free and faithful grace. Now as Christians our confession is "Jesus is

Lord.” So if “Jesus is Lord” and “The LORD is my shepherd,” then it follows that Psalm 23 is telling us that Jesus is our shepherd. Jesus himself declared that in John chapter 10. He said, “**I am the good shepherd.**” (10:11)

There should be, I think, a sense of amazement in us at hearing that the LORD is our *shepherd*. This is, after all, the same LORD about whom we confess, “**By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth.**” (Ps. 33:6) But this same LORD is the personal shepherd of the likes of me and you. Being a shepherd is hard work. It’s lonely work that’s physically taxing and potentially dangerous. It requires exposure to the elements and it’s not lucrative. Shepherds were not highly regarded members of society in Bible times. So why would our Creator identify himself as a shepherd? For this reason: The way a faithful shepherd cares for his sheep is very much like the way the LORD cares for us. As this psalm brings out, there are numerous points of comparison.

If Jesus is my shepherd, then I am his sheep, his lamb. In a sense, it’s not very flattering to be called a sheep. In his book, *A Shepherd Looks at the 23rd Psalm*, Phillip Keller writes, “***It is no accident that God has chosen to call us sheep...Our mass mind (or mob instincts), our fears and timidity, our stubbornness and stupidity, our perverse habits are all parallels of profound importance.***” But to confess myself to be a member of Jesus’ flock is also to state my faith in him, to acknowledge gratefully my dependence on him. It’s a blessed thing, an act of grace on God’s part, that we can identify ourselves as members of the flock of Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

The few times that I’ve seen flocks of sheep under the care of a shepherd, there appeared to be several dozen sheep in the flock at most. I’m sure that an experienced shepherd can care for quite a few more than that, but it’s amazing to think that Jesus is shepherd to everyone who believes in him. That requires a great deal of the shepherd, because the needs of his flock are many.

2. My needs are many

As you scan Psalm 23 you can see at a glance some of the needs that sheep have. They need pastures where they can feed. They need water to drink. They need to be restored when they have strayed. They need to be guided in the right paths. They need protection as they make their way through dark valleys. They need the comfort of the shepherd’s presence. I have an idea that being a shepherd is harder than it looks. It’s not just taking a stroll with the sheep. Sheep tend to stray, being pretty much heedless of their own welfare. Unprotected, they are easy victims for coyotes or wolves or even dogs. They can get caught by their wool in thorns or wedged between rocks. Ewes, especially, can tip over and not be able to get back onto their feet. Sheep are sometimes plagued by flies that burrow into their flesh or infest their nasal passages. They may also be at odds with each other, ramming and butting each other and causing injury. And that’s just a partial list. Sheep have many, many needs.

But our needs as the human members of the LORD's flock are even more numerous. There are, of course, the physical needs of food, clothing, shelter, and safety. That's a lengthy list of needs right there if we were to go into detail about it, but in addition we have our spiritual needs. We need spiritual sustenance. Our souls need to be fed. We need to be guided on the right paths. We need protection from Satan and his marauding forces. As we state our needs in the Lord's Prayer, we confess the need for forgiveness for our trespasses, for protection in time of temptation, and for deliverance from the Evil One. No wonder this verse occurs repeatedly in the psalms: "**Hear, O LORD, and answer me, for I am poor and needy.**" (Ps. 86:1; 109:22; 40:17; 70:5)

But how do you feel about confessing your great neediness? I ask this because I think one of the great virtues of secular America is self-sufficiency. *I do for myself. I'm the captain of my own fate.* But, you know, the saying, "The Lord helps those that help themselves," doesn't come from the Bible. If we think that we've gotten beyond the need to sing "I Am Jesus' Little Lamb," then it might be an indication that we're forgetting how needy we really are. "The LORD is my shepherd" is not the confession of those who are proudly self-sufficient, who believe that their can-do spirit and their ability to improvise will see them through any difficulty. "The LORD is my shepherd" is the confession of those who acknowledge their weaknesses and understand their limitations. And it's the right confession because there will be times when I need God's comfort in my bereavement, when I need his guidance to put an end to my confusion, when I need his protection from my foes, and his rebuke to call me back from the error of my ways. Most of all, we stand in constant need of God's forgiveness. Without it, I'm just a vapor, a breath that vanishes from sight and memory. It's not weakness but wisdom that acknowledges, *I am poor and needy, but the LORD is my shepherd.*

So we've established that shepherding isn't easy. Sheep have many needs. So do the human sheep of God's flock. What makes Jesus our Good Shepherd is not just his knowledge of our needs, but his ability to unfailingly supply what we need. Phillip Keller, the shepherd who looked at the 23rd Psalm, calls this psalm "David's Hymn of Praise to Divine Diligence." The LORD simply does not allow our needs to go unmet.

3. His supply is unfailing

Immediately after the humble confession of dependence on the LORD—"The LORD is my shepherd"—comes a bold statement of confidence in the LORD: "*I shall not be in want.*" As the hymn says, "***I nothing lack if I am his.***" In perfect wisdom, with constant attentiveness, the LORD richly supplies what we need.

David says of the LORD, "*He makes me lie down in green pastures.*" Phillip Keller says that there are four things that sheep need before they will lie down. They need to be free from fear, free from hunger, free from the pestering of flies

or parasites, and free from friction with other members of the flock. In other words, it's quite an accomplishment to get a flock of sheep to lie down in peace. But that's what the LORD our shepherd has done for us. He's caused us to lie down in green pastures and led us beside quiet waters. But keep in mind that this is not a psalm in praise of relaxation; it's a psalm that praises God's Word. This peaceful scene of sheep lying down in green pastures beside quiet waters becomes a reality for us when the Holy Spirit leads us to believe that Jesus himself is our peace. By his death at Calvary, he appeased God's righteous anger at our sins. Now we live not under the unrelenting gaze of an angry God, but under the watchful eye of a gracious and forgiving God.

"He restores my soul." The Christian life is unfortunately not one of constant peace. We have a sinful nature that wants to explore the treacherous paths of disobedience. We are sheep that tend to stray. There may even be times when we go against our consciences and do what we know to be wrong. It's then that the LORD uses his Word to restore our souls. King David had experience with that. The arrogance of power deceived him into thinking he could commit adultery and conspire to take a man's life without any real consequences. But when he kept silent, his bones wasted away. The LORD's hand lay heavy upon him as he tried to suppress his guilt. Then came the prophet Nathan, the laser-like accusation of sin, and ultimately, confession and forgiveness and restoration. Through his Word, through his law and gospel, the LORD restores our souls.

A wise shepherd knows that he can't allow his sheep to graze continually in one place. That area will become over-grazed to the detriment of both the sheep and the pasture. The grass will be eaten off until just the nub of the root will be visible and bare spots will appear in the pasture. So a wise shepherd leads his sheep down the path to new pastures. Through his Word, the LORD guides us, too. His word is a lamp to our feet and a light for our path. Most important, God's Word causes us to see that righteousness is—by our own efforts—beyond our grasp. But as today's first lesson reminded us, God has sent us a shepherd/king who is **"The LORD our righteousness."**

Then comes the verse in which David says, *"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me."* The valley of the shadow of death sounds like a frightening place, doesn't it? Yet even when we confront "the last great enemy," death, we don't have to sink into helpless fear. Even there, God's Word supplies our need and comforts us. We know that our Redeemer lives. Jesus was not abandoned to the grave. He rose from death, signaling that all those who trust him as their Savior will also conquer death. No matter what we face, our shepherd's rod—which he uses to defend us from our enemies—and his staff, which he gently uses to guide us, serve as a wonderful source of comfort.

After verse 4, most commentators believe that the picture changes from a flock of sheep and their shepherd to the picture of a royal banquet. There are tables

groaning under the weight of the food. The host anoints the head of his guests with oil. Cups run over with the plenty of this feast. We are at this feast. We're attending it right now as our Savior feeds us richly with his Word and Sacraments. Jesus himself is the host. He serves us, cleansing us from our sins through the Word of truth and pouring out on us his Holy Spirit.

This is an amazing psalm. It's amazing that something written 3,000 years ago could be so relevant to our lives today. It's amazing that something so few of us have experienced personally—tending sheep—could work so well help us understand God's loving care for us. And it's amazing, most of all, because here we learn that the Creator of the universe, the LORD, is our shepherd. Though our needs are many, he unfailingly supplies what we need. Amen.